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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CAN THO AND AN GIANG UNIVERSITIES - SEEKING
RESOURCES TO MODERNIZE

1. (SBU) Summary. During a recent trip to the Mekong Delta region, DCM met with the Vice-Rector of Can Tho University and the Rector of An Giang University. Both expressed disappointment at the slow start to the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) scholarship program and expressed hope that its web site would be updated soon. They noted that more and more students were expressing interest in studying English and IT, and indicated they would like to see more students studying agricultural development. They also said they would welcome volunteers with professional experience from the U.S. to help modernize teaching methods and curriculum, and improve English skills. Mission believes this may be a good opening for bringing Peace Corps to Vietnam. End summary.

Can Tho University

2. (U) During a recent visit, DCM, Embassy Poloff, ConGen EconOff, and ConGen Pol/Econ assistant met with Dr. Nguyen Anh Tuan, Vice Rector in Charge of International Relations, and Dr. Ha Thanh Toan, Director of the Biotechnology Research and Development Institute at Can Tho University (CTU). Dr. Tuan, who completed graduate studies at Auburn University (Alabama), described CTU as a public university. The administration is elected by the faculty and then formally appointed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), in consultation with the People's Committee of Can Tho Province. The curriculum is set by the professors and approved by MOET. Tuition to attend CTU is \$100 a year, and the VND 100 billion annual budget (approximately USD 6.5 million) is funded by a combination of tuition, central government funding, international aid, and research sponsorships. Approximately five percent of the students are eligible to receive merit-based scholarships. Students in CTU's Education College -- like all students who study the profession of teaching in Vietnam -- do not pay tuition, provided they work as teachers after graduation.

3. (U) According to Dr. Tuan, CTU has roughly 34,000 students enrolled at its main campus and satellite colleges throughout the Mekong Delta, making it one of the five largest universities in Vietnam. Its staff numbers about 1600, of whom six are currently studying in the U.S. About 22 percent of Vietnam's population lives in the Delta provinces. Until An Giang University (AGU) was established in December 1999, CTU was the only university in the Mekong Delta region. While 17,000 students attend classes at the main CTU campus, only 6000 students live there. CTU has some private, commercially-funded research programs as well as regular course study. Competition for fellowships to conduct graduate and undergraduate research is fierce: CTU admitted only 4400 (six percent) of 74,000 applicants to do research in 2003.

4. (U) Dr. Tuan inquired about the progress of the VEF, as its website had not posted any new information recently. DCM informed him that the VEF recently selected 22 Vietnamese students already enrolled in advanced degree programs in the U.S., mostly in hard sciences and information technology (IT), for the first round of scholarships. Dr. Tuan and Dr. Toan (who completed his PhD in food science at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana) agreed that CTU should put forward agriculture students as candidates for VEF scholarships in the future. Both academics noted that it was unfortunate that more bright students were not studying agriculture, as Vietnam is an agricultural economy and needs good leaders, in order to become more productive and efficient in that sector. They described the Faculty of Agriculture as the strongest school at CTU.

5. (U) Dr. Tuan added that increasing numbers of students had changed their major field of study to English. Many of them were now shifting to IT. He noted that there are currently volunteers at CTU from Australia, Canada, Japan and the U.K. teaching courses ranging from IT to medicine to English. He said the highest priority of employers in Vietnam today is to hire graduates who can speak English.

Technical skills and high marks are a distant second and third.

16. (U) Regarding special treatment for ethnic minority students, Dr. Tuan said that while each Mekong Delta province has built a dormitory at CTU for its students, the GVN built one to house minorities, mostly Khmer and Cham. The GVN dormitory holds 400 beds, and occupancy has generally run at 70-80 percent, with a small number of minority students living off-campus. Ethnic minority students also take part in the numerous student groups on campus.

17. (SBU) Dr. Tuan also discussed the status of a number of universities which have recently opened or will be opening in the Delta, and their varying degrees of freedom to determine their own curriculum and sources of funding. They are:

-- An Giang University. (see para. 8) Opened end of 1999.

-- University of Medicine and Dentistry in Can Tho. Opened in April 2003, funded by the Ministry of Health (MOH), curriculum approved by both MOH and MOET. Founded upon the School of Medicine that was formerly part of CTU.

-- University of Education and Pedagogy in Dong Thap. Opened April 2003, centrally funded. Established to train teachers, curriculum must be approved by MOET.

-- Fisheries University of Kien Giang. Unsure when it will open, but will be central government funded. May have been created for political reasons, since Mr. Nguyen Tan Dung, the First Deputy Prime Minister, is from Kien Giang. The GVN has requested that the satellite branch of Nha Trang University of Fisheries located in Saigon move to Rach Gia to support the creation of this new university.

-- Mekong University in Vinh Long. Opened in 2000, private, curriculum established by professors but must be approved by MOET. Some retired government officials own shares in this university.

An Giang University -----

18. (U) DCM and party met separately with the Harvard-educated Dr. Vo Tong Xuan, Rector of AGU. AGU was formally opened by decree in December 1999, and receives funding from the GVN and An Giang province. MOET approves the curriculum. Dr. Xuan took over as Rector of the University in February 2000, and during these first few years he said his top priority has been trying to attract and retain new faculty. His second priority has been to upgrade the skills of the existing faculty.

19. (U) Regarding recruitment, Dr. Xuan said he has been seeking out and hiring the rare Vietnamese professors who understand the "Western" way of teaching, where students are expected to come to class having already read the material, prepared to participate in a class discussion. He said around 50 percent of the teaching faculty are new, relatively young, and try to use the "Western" model. The exchange program which An Giang University has developed with Bluffton College in Ohio has also helped faculty learn new pedagogical styles from visiting American professors, he remarked.

110. (SBU) Regarding development of the current faculty, Dr. Xuan said he has had some difficulty getting the older faculty from the former An Giang Teachers' Training College -- many of whom have been teaching for decades and are "really set in their ways" -- to adapt and develop new methods of teaching. Before the next school year starts, Dr. Xuan plans to host a seminar to train faculty to use the computer program "WebCities" to make their syllabi and electronic reading material available to students on-line.

111. (U) AGU boasts the largest computer library in Vietnam, with 100 computers donated from the Ford Foundation, but Dr. Xuan said the number of visitors to the library fell from 800 to 40 per week, as students tried to get course materials on-line and found the materials had not been uploaded by all of the professors. He expressed optimism that AGU students will soon be able to access the Bluffton College "Ohio Link" electronic library, but lamented that because of slow on-line data transmission rates in Vietnam, students may not gain as much benefit as he hoped. High-speed Internet connection via satellite link has recently been approved for use in two software parks in Vietnam. When ConGen EconOff raised this with Dr. Xuan, he said AGU might need a connection like this to remain effective.

112. (U) Dr. Xuan said he would like see a migration of redundant labor in the agricultural sector to the industrial

or service sectors, and has set up a curriculum to support this. In 2000-2001, AGU admitted students for programs focusing on math, literature, English, business finance, and business accounting. Starting in 2002, students were also admitted to programs focusing on agricultural products processing and preservation, rural development, agricultural engineering, information technology, and environmental management. Dr. Xuan also suggested that Vietnamese rice farmers need to consolidate and rights in order to bring rice production to its most efficient level, but there is a lack of direction at the highest levels of government that could bring about this change. Only if leadership establishes firm policies and offers incentives for farmers to be more efficient in the agricultural sector will the economy of Vietnam fundamentally change, he said.

13. (U) Note: Dr. Xuan's strong background in agricultural development and wet rice cultivation is attracting students to AGU. He is widely credited with being the man who saved Vietnam from famine in the early 1980s by improving methods of rice cultivation, and bears the nickname "Dr. Rice". He is a member of the board of the Rockefeller Foundation.

14. (U) Comment: Both Dr. Tuan and Dr. Xuan expressed concern that Vietnam's agricultural economy is inefficient, and that there is a lack of leadership in the GVN in rural and agricultural development. This lack of leadership has contributed to students choosing other areas of study, and to farmers using unproductive or counterproductive farming methods. They were both disappointed by the relatively slow start to the VEF program and under-representation of the agricultural field. They will seek to identify good candidates, and hope the VEF Board of Directors will address the need for agricultural development in Vietnam when considering applications next year.

15. (SBU) Comment continued: Both Dr. Tuan and Dr. Xuan said the professional experience and functional abilities of visiting faculty from the U.S. and other countries were sought-after commodities in Vietnam. Dr. Tuan asked outright if the USG would be willing to start up an official "volunteers" program to send professors to CTU to teach. Many universities have approached ConGen seeking additional resources to improve teaching methodology and curriculum, as well as English language training. Mission believes this may be the right time to begin negotiations on an MOU to bring Peace Corps Volunteers to Vietnam to address this need. End comment.
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